"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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CHRIST AND THE LAND

AN ENGLISH FARMER SPEAKS

By W. S. Boycott*

Dearly beloved, we are here concerned to bring together husbandry and the Christian faith, which is an honourable union instituted by God Himself within the Old Testament, a mystical union, signed and sealed in Jesus Christ, by the fulness of His life and teaching for all mankind.

First, it was ordained that we might know one God as Father, who feeds, succours, and redeems us by the wholeness of Life, in which the increase of natural things is divinely appointed. Secondly, it was ordained that we might avoid pantheism, crankiness, and all other errors of thought, which our contact with creation, implanted in us by God, produces, and that this might be hallowed and directed aright. Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual advantage and enhancement of both farming and faith, that each might find in the other a truer perspective both for the Glory of God and the benefit of all mankind. To which mysterious union we must now give our serious and seeking attention.

THE CHURCH, THE LAND, AND GOD

The renewed interest which the church is taking in agriculture presents us with a series of questions. The concern with the practical, sociological matters of rural welfare, and methods of agriculture, and also the revival of agricultural services in our churches are to be welcomed. Behind these there are, however, theological principles concerning the connection of the land with our faith which should not be neglected. Indeed, because the church is prepared

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to take agriculture and man's need of food into account, we may find that this will bring with it a renewal of some truths of theology which have been long forgotten. In Christ there is not merely hope and salvation, but life, a wholeness of life, the real implications of which are omitted from many theological discussions. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to show that if we are to recover the sense of this wholeness we can only do so by basing our theology on the land as well as upon the bible. While not denying that Christ is the core of the Christian faith, Creation is the foundation upon which the whole justification of Christianity rests. It is only by taking into consideration man's vital relationship to the land (as a part of creation as a whole) that we can really begin to appreciate this wholeness which should be reflected in our theology. The Lambeth Report of 1948 states it clearly:

> "Our need for bread, our need for one another, and our need for God, are all interdependent."
>
> (Part II, p. 5)

This, in a few words, gives us a clue to the shape of God's changeless pattern for man, in an ever-changing world. It is really the impact of this changeless pattern upon everyday life which the church, seeking to be 'up-to-date', overlooks or neglects. It is this changeless pattern, the basis of the faith of the Old Testament, completed and fulfilled in the Incarnation and then passed on to the Church down through the ages, that we are here concerned with.

God, as seen in the pages of the Old Testament, is the Active, Living God (I Sam. xvii, 26; Hos. i, 10 etc.), the God of Fact, rather than of philosophical idealism. He is the God and Father of the corn and wine as much as of His people (Hos. ii, 8). The good and fertile land was given by God to Israel (or as we might say to His church) as an Inheritance (Deut. vi, 21., Ps. cv, 11 etc.). The significance is all the greater when we recall that in the Old Testament world good fertile land was scarce, and might be just as precious as the word of the Lord. As we shall see later, such good and fertile land is once more becoming scarce in the world. Our modern idea that all creation is fallen, and because of this of little relevance to our faith, is completely absent from the Old Testament where man is fallen and creation is "very good". For this reason the rural approach to Christianity must include the devotional side. Christian devotion is not always based, as it should be, upon facts of reality, but upon some escapist moonshine that seems to disregard the full reality of the living, active God we find in the Bible.

Further, creation is 'sacramental'. What we discover about God in this must help us to appreciate in its widest sense sacramental worship, and become an important clue to the significance of the Eucharist itself. In the Old Testament we find this connection between faith and agriculture, worship and life, in what seems to be precisely this sacramental relationship. The 78th Psalm is a good example of the faith of the Old Testament being inseparable from the land and creation. Here man's utter dependence on the land for his food and God as his only true Guide are completely interwoven. This is clearly summed up in the last verse (72)-

> "He fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands."

We are continually meeting this same interdependence of the land and Hebrew faith.

THE BIBLE AND AGRICULTURE

> "The Lord will be jealous for the land and bless (or pity His people." (Joel ii, 18).

Part of Uzziah's great godly character is that he loved husbandry (II Chron. xxvi, 10). Creation and man's use of divine resources for his natural requirement of food are the real foundation of Israel's faith. This is the tough foundation of the religion of reality which may seem to have little or no connection with religion as we sometimes think of it. As Professor Dodd has put it:

> "The strength of the people lay in this simple farming stock tenacious of the land and its traditions progressing through unremitting industry, yet never far from the poverty which the death of the bread-winner or two or three bad harvests might bring. To put one's best into the soil...are it's root values--and no bad foundation for religion, though of religion in the technical sense there is almost nothing said."
>
> The Authority of The Bible, p. 147

Why farming people are so often regarded as 'simple' one does not know, as they are simple only in the sense of not being complex academically, but behind a thin simpleness on the outside, country people have a depth of character and feeling for which anyone who has lived with them much can only have a profound regard. Agricultural prosperity is an integral part of the wholeness of life, contingent upon the faithfulness of the Israelites to God (Deut. xxviii, 1-14). They are to become the 'Head' of His creation, only as His blessing rests upon all Creation (vv. 13-14). The art of prayer (which is something very different from 'saying' prayers) and the art of husbandry are linked together (Ecclus. vii, 14-15).

Christ fulfilled not merely the Missianic prophecies but the whole religious conception of the meaning of life found in the Old Testament. Man's relation to creation and to God is completed in Christ. This can be seen conveniently in three ways, which, though they may appear to be three distinct aspects of His gospel, are yet all parts of one important whole.

First, as is so obvious and yet so misunderstood, much of Christ's teaching is rooted in nature and creation. The sower and the seed, the good and the corrupt tree, consider the lilies, these all are not merely illustrations in words, for behind them is an understanding of all created things which few, if indeed any other man of nature has ever apprehended, let alone understood. When He said "Consider the Lilies..." He meant consider them. That is contemplate the relationship of the lily, and all other created things to God Himself. It is just His deep understanding of nature which gives so much of His teaching its real point. As Professor Dodd has put it "human life, including the religious life, is a part of nature as distinctly stated in

the well-known passage 'Consider the fowls of the air...' (Lk. xii, 24-28). This sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premise of all the parables." Some of the teaching concerning His own person, e.g. the corn of wheat which must die to live again (Jn. xii, 24), is again based upon this supreme understanding of nature and leads us to the second aspect-- His person. New Testament writers agree that any comprehension of the person of Christ must involve a reference back to Creation. He is the fulfillment of the Wisdom and Word creation doctrine of the Old Testament, and thereby hangs His justification. That in Him all things consist (Col. I, 17) leads directly on to His Headship of the Church.

THE WHOLENESS OF CHRIST

In Christ, then, we get a direct and permanent link, a tie which must not be broken, between man-in-nature and man-in-God; a creative and redemptive wholeness which, admittedly, is not always simple to do full justice to. Dualism cannot do justice to this fullness and wholeness, which is an essential character of Him, his revelation of God, and the meaning of Life.

Every aspect of Christ is such that it bears influence on the whole of His Person. For example, if we hold that He is the Lord of agriculture, this must of necessity shape our conception of Him as Master or Redeemer, as our Passover or Bread of Life. Because one argues that agriculture is particularly relevant to religion and especially to Christianity, one must not suppose that Christ is only (or merely) Lord of the Land, or the Master Husbandman. The Gospel of wholeness does however begin there. And if we are to fully appreciate many of His deeper sayings, such as "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life." or even more, "This is my body", we must see these words as part of a whole gospel, which begins in creation and is continued as man deals with the renewing of creation in his own dealings with the land from whence he derives the very substance of all life -- food.

The Church, if it is truly to confront the world with Christ, must confront it with this wholeness, or fulness, of Life as this is seen in Him. That it seldom in fact does so and holds before the world a limited, and thus distorted, picture of Him who Is, is a tragedy we need not dwell upon now. Rather let us see how the Church can, and must, proclaim this fuller gospel in which life in the sense of physical being (psyche) is the foundation and way into Life Eternal (zoe). The sacramental relationship of these, their oneness, is perhaps the innermost secret of Christian faith, (cp. Jn. vi, 40). Christianity proclaims that all extra bodily functions, such as joy, hope, faith, above all love, are only fully found in Christ. For two reasons, because of the Incarnation itself on one hand, and because men cannot be men, let alone saints, out of the body, Christianity is the widest and the most materialistic, of all religions, embracing as it does not only the whole of man, but all he depends on both in heaven and earth. Nor should we ever overlook the fact that this wideness of our religion is narrowed down and seen, pin-pointed as it were, in the Incarnation, on "Him in whom all things consist." To be practical, the church must proclaim what appears to be two things, and yet are in reality but one. These two are the right use of our natural resources, what is commonly known as good husbandry, and the fullness of a dogmatic faith, which is something more than a spiritual morality, a true reflection of the Incarnation itself.

THE MEANING OF GOOD HUSBANDRY

Precisely what we mean by good husbandry is not as easy to define as those who do not understand the land appear to assume it is. It is, of course, the practice of a certain mode of agriculture, and the observance of certain rules. Yet it is more than this - it is a relationship with the land into which the farmer enters. It is a fidelity in the strictest sense which includes conformity to truth and fact. It is to honour, cherish, and obey the land.

Agriculture today is, and rightly so, scientific, but not wholely so. Science has definite limitations which on the land are fairly well understood by the good farmer, and often neglected by the bad one. Here we ought to mention a certain school of thought in agriculture who makes claims for organic, as against inorganic, methods of husbandry and say that the use of what are called 'artificial' manures are detrimental under all circumstances, whereas organic manures are good. No one would deny that rather more dung on the land than the English farmer can produce under present conditions would be a good thing. Yet good husbandry is not determined by what manure is used, but the way in which all manures are used and related to the whole process of cultivating the land. In agriculture as in theological fields, there are bigoted cranks who, by putting the limelight on a fraction of the truth, make out that it is the whole truth. A great deal of the art of the farmer is a technical skill about which the church, as the church, can have little or nothing to say. But we must not suppose, nor, which may be worse, let any farmer suppose that his whole craft is technical.

THE CHURCH AND CONSERVATION

This brings us to the second thing the church must proclaim. That is a clear, dogmatic faith which really has its roots in the ground. A faith which proclaims that "Jesus is Lord" rests upon the facts of creation. A faith, moreover, which sets the Incarnation within a cosmological framework, and which is prepared to see in creation an ultimate and final vindication of God's love for man, is the witness that he feeds us (Acts xiv, 17). We need a religion which, when it asserts that man shall not live by bread alone, does not overlook the primary importance of bread to all which can be meant by the word salvation.

All this is of very special relevance to the world situation of today. The world is a great deal shorter of food than most people realize, even if they do realize a probable cause of this shortage-war. "Swords or ploughshares" is as much a question of the moment as it is of the Old Testament. The situation is bad enough, but the fact that those who control the destinies of mankind, parliaments, politicians, as much as the leaders of organized religion, are doing too little about it. Soil is neglected, it is permitted to become a dust bowl; and land is allowed to become unproductive. While the situation is becoming daily worse through an increase in the world's population, the available land fit to produce food is fast decreasing. For all our benefits of an alleged intelligent and rational age, supported by science and technology, we are running straight ahead into the age of want, sheer want of food. If the series of upheavals which have marked the first half of the twentieth century for world history are not to lead to utter disaster in the second half and succeeding centuries, mankind has got to look to the land. And so looking to husband

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it, to nurse the land, to encourage, first, land fertility, and second, food production. Merely to seek, first and last, food production will only be to rob the land still further. Soil fertility is the basis of Human society just as much as the Love of God is its crowning point.

Here I believe the Christian church has an opportunity of winning the respect and the allegiance of the world as it has never done before. The church could take this opportunity and proclaim to the world, not only that the earth is the Lord's, but that He has given man a charge to subdue it, and use it for both man's benefit and God's own glory. So far as the welfare of the land is concerned the church is anything but a good and faithful servant. What can we then expect from the Lord of the vineyard and the Heir, but judgment, harsh judgment? First, the church must bring to bear on agricultural problems the gospel of good husbandry and fair treatment of the land. Just as in marriage it is difficult to say one sort of conduct is right and the other wrong, so in farming there are not just right and wrong methods, but a right and a wrong attitude to the whole of a husbandman's calling. The church is not concerned with details of method, but with emphasising to all that husbandry-upon which the life of the world depends-is an art, a calling which is sacramentally Holy, and to which there must be a specifically Christian attitude. This is bringing the gospel to the land, a task which is something more than seeing that dairy maids go to their communions, though it may ultimately involve this too. What might be called the ethics of good husbandry need far more study than anyone has given them in recent years. To condemn modern methods, because they are modern is an absurdity.

Side by side with the proclamation by the church of the gospel to the land, is the enrichment of the church by the gospel from the land. We have already discussed this, and seen that there is an important factor in Christian faith which arises from the land, yet which is in no sense pantheism, because it is vindicated by reference to Christ. This double relevance of the land, (if such it may be called) finds its place in the Lambeth Report for 1948 in the committee's report on the Christian doctrine of man (p. 6).

> "Those who live by raising crops - the most obvious instance of man's co-operation with the Creator - can still understand better than anyone else the religious conception of man's work in the world, in dependance on God, and for the service of His will. Thus the new concern of the church with agriculture may be found to have far-reaching social consequences.

The religious conception referred to here can have even more consequences than those we might usually call 'social'. It can have definite religious ones in an enlivening of the faith of the whole church. As agriculture has its scientific and religious aspects, we may well find that it may provide the wanting clue to the real Christian connection between science and religion. Indeed, in the light of what we find happens in man's tilling of the ground, we may well have to reconsider the meaning which we attach to both the words, science and religion. Science, so far as it can demonstrate the 'how' of life, sets before us a working principle, a principle which is obscured to some extent by its great diversity. But it cannot say anything of the cause of this principle, or the power behind it. That is the 'why' of life which is the concern of religion.

The revival of the agricultural services, Plough Sunday, Rogation and Lammas is to be welcomed and further extended. One word of warning is, however, necessary. The rightful background and setting must be understood; these services can so easily be used by the church as occasions for a stunt or to make a splash, and their real meaning entirely overlooked. It was because their theological significance had been forgotten that they fell out of fashion, let us not bring them back now and forget that they rest upon good doctrine and sound theology. Just as Christmas, Easter and the other major festivals of the church are essential to our understanding of the life of Our Lord, so these agricultural observances are part of the whole gospel.

FINDING GOD THROUGH HIS CREATION

It is through man's concern with the land that he encounters in a most obvious way this secret of life. He feels God as well as thinks about Him. Perhaps feeling God as well as thinking about Him is the height of true prayer and worship. (But how seldom does anyone point this out!) It is from the land, and perhaps nowhere else, that the church can, indeed must, if she is to survive, regain this conception of life; a conception which makes it at once real and at once Holy. It is also interesting to notice that the Evangelism Report says that if there is to be a national revival in religion the seeds of this may germinate in the countryside and spread to the towns and cities. No reason is given for this suggestion, one can only surmise that a vague sense of the reality of the countryman's religion was in mind, such as we have attempted to outline here. As things appear to many people at the moment the countryman's religion is half pagan, whereas the church has a dogmatic faith concerning Christ, and these two appear almost incompatible. If these are to be brought together in unity, truth and concord we must notice two things. The paganism of the countryman is far from being synonymous with 'heathenism', and, in fact, few people who use the word pagan so glibly today, use it in its correct sense.

Finally, Christian thought must never forget that if men do not live by bread alone, they must first live on bread, the staff of life, and discover through this that man's fuller life here on earth extends right into heaven through true worship; the kind of worship which in its fulness reiterates the fulness of Christ, so that the whole earth becomes full of His glory.